

[Frederick Douglass, 1818 - 1895](#)

### Frederick Douglass

This is the first main post of our new series of African Revolutionary Writers. You will receive four instalments in each weekly part, over ten weeks, with each instalment highlighting one revolutionary writer. These are your regular political education posts for the first quarter of 2012. They are distinguished from other posts by the background colour, and are also clearly marked as “African Revolutionary Writers”. We begin with a giant: Frederick Douglass.

#### Context

The first part of this ten-part series on African Revolutionary Writers covers the period from slavery to Imperialism. The slave trade began when Portuguese ships passed Cape Bojador on the coast of Western Sahara in 1434, bringing them south of the great desert for the first time.

They immediately took slaves. These, the first slaves of the bourgeoisie, were sold to Spanish colonists on the Canary Islands, where the original inhabitants (the [Guanches](#)) had already been enslaved and worked to extinction. The triangular slave-trade pattern: Portugal - Africa - Canary Islands - was soon afterwards scaled up to Britain - Africa - West Indies (or alternatively Brazil or North America). The Atlantic Slave Trade took slaves across the ocean via the “Middle Passage”, and brought back sugar, tobacco, cotton and other plantation-grown commodities.

Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic to the West Indies in 1492 and touched the continent of South America in 1498, the same year that Vasco da Gama reached India by the Cape sea route. By 1502 the trans-Atlantic slave trade was in full flow, first as a Portuguese monopoly, later as a British monopoly.

Although Marx notes in “Capital” that capitalism began in the 1500s, yet for more than three centuries the dominant business of the Western European bourgeoisie was not capitalism, but the Atlantic slave trade, and the biggest operator in that business was Britain. This situation lasted until the capitalist “Industrial Revolution” of the late 1700s, also in Britain.

Only when the Western bourgeoisie made its turn towards capitalism did it become expedient for it to avail some blacks, released slaves, to create a literary *genre* called the “slave narrative”, as part of the capitalist campaign to suppress slavery so as to make room for a new, more productive, exploited class: the wage-slaves or working proletariat. An early example of this *genre* is the work of [Olaudah Equiano](#), who wrote a book about his “[Interesting Life](#)” as a slave and rescued slave, published in 1789. These slave-narrative books tended not only to expose the evils of slavery, but also to praise Christianity and capitalism in equal measure, in order to flatter their sponsors and readers.

### Douglass

In this regard [Frederick Douglass](#)’s work was exceptional for the breadth and the rebellious fearlessness of his rhetoric. Douglass broke free from the limits of the slave narrative *genre* so as to begin to create a truly revolutionary black literature, and this is why our series begins with him.

After escaping by train from twenty years of slavery Douglass wrote an extraordinary slave narrative called [My Bondage and My Freedom](#), first published in 1855. He included, in the same volume, a series of six transcripts of speeches or orations that he had given as a campaigner against slavery. Slavery was abolished in the USA in 1865 at the end of the US Civil War, and ten years after the publication of Frederick Douglass’s book.

These six particular lectures of Douglass’s are contained in one of the two attached documents. “What to the slave is the Fourth of July?” is a famous one, but they are all outstanding. This was an orator!

### Power concedes nothing without a demand

But the main reading, attached, is the most immortal of all of Frederick Douglass’s speeches, known as “**If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress**” from 1857, which contains the famous phrase: “**Power concedes nothing without a demand.**” If you read nothing else of Douglass’s, do read this extraordinary piece of revolutionary literature, for the good advice that it gives: *power concedes nothing without a demand*.

The American Civil War of 1861-1865 was an armed conflict between one part of the bourgeoisie and another. It represented the real capitalist revolution in the USA, when the specifically capitalist bourgeoisie gained its dictatorship, the same US bourgeois dictatorship that still exists today.

For Africans, the global abolition of slavery was a relief after three centuries of terrible mass-scale atrocity. But the abolition of outright slavery also marked the beginning of wage slavery, and of military invasions, conquest, domination, plunder, settlement and colonialism. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, globalist neo-colonialism and Imperialism followed.

African political writing tracked all these changes. In this week’s part we look briefly at the literature of the period of slavery and colonial expansion. In the next, we will move into the literature of the post-WW2 era of decolonisation.



[Ngugi wa Thiong'o](#)

## Ngugi wa Thiong'o

### Ngugi the Academic

Ngugi's (**attached**) essay "The Writer in a Neo-colonial State", first published in 1986 in a publication called "The Black Scholar", and subsequently as part of the 1993 book "Moving the Centre", helps this project of ours considerably.

Ngugi taught at Nairobi University and later in the USA. As much as he is a novelist, he has also been an academic.

In this essay Ngugi takes a long look back over the period from the end of the Second World War, and divides it roughly into three - the fifties, the sixties, and the seventies; liberation struggle; victory and independence; and neo-colonialist reaction. He considers the way that the literature affected these passages of history, and was affected by them

We have not used such a schema, nor did we start with the Second World War, but Ngugi's overview does chime in with our series to an extent. Clearly, in nearly all the countries of Africa, neo-colonialism has taken hold, and maintained its grip. Ngugi problematised it in his way, and so have we, in our way.

In 2011, a quarter of a century after Ngugi's essay was written, an African country – Libya - has been attacked by the imperialists with full-scale military force, bombed, shelled, rocketed and invaded. Libya was the first country in Africa to become independent after the world wars, and it was the only one to have achieved parity, in its general standard of living, with the European countries on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea from Africa.

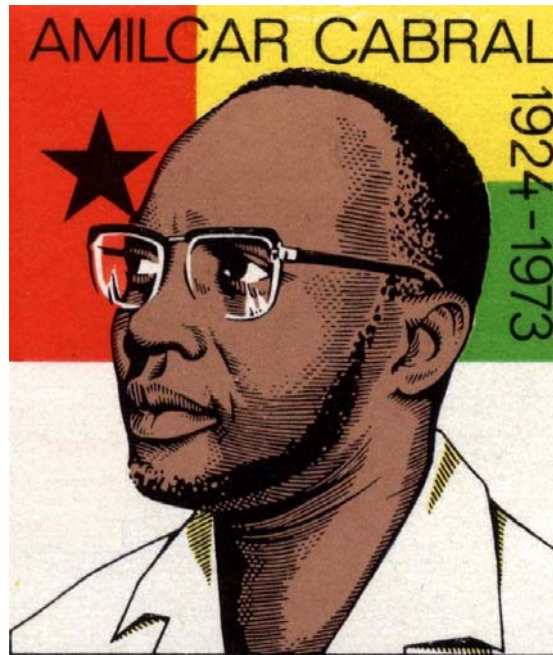
Now Libya is being catastrophically underdeveloped. Neo-colonialism is still with us but now armed, brutal, direct, naked colonialism is back, as well.

There is an immense amount of wisdom in Ngugi's essay. Do, please, read it.

Ngugi concludes: "as the struggle continues and intensifies, the lot of the writer in a neo-colonial state will become harder and not easier."

This is our lot. For as much as heroes have gone before, and for as much as the written record is priceless and indispensable, yet we who remain will have to do it all again, and in conditions of even greater difficulty. We have no right to expect less, or to expect less of ourselves.

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[Amilcar Cabral, 1924 - 1973](#)

## Amilcar Cabral

The text for this week (**attached**) is Amilcar Cabral's speech on [National Liberation and Culture](#). This speech was originally delivered on February 20, 1970, as part of the Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture Series at Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York. That is more than forty years ago, yet the speech is as fresh and as relevant as if it had been written yesterday, and based on appraisal of our present circumstances.

Foreign domination *"can be maintained only by the permanent, organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned,"* wrote Cabral. Attempted assimilation is *"a more or less violent attempt to deny the culture of the people in question."* It does not work. In fact there are no ways in which the coloniser can succeed.

*"...it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement,"* says Cabral.

*"...national liberation takes place when, and only when, national productive forces are completely free of all kinds of foreign domination. The liberation of productive forces and consequently the ability to determine the mode of production most appropriate to the evolution of the liberated people necessarily opens up new prospects for the cultural development of the society in question, by returning to that society all its capacity to create progress,"* says Cabral.

Cabral develops the idea that *"...we must take into account the fact that, faced with the prospect of political independence, the ambition and opportunism from which the liberation movement generally suffers may bring into the struggle unconverted individuals. The latter, on the basis of their level of schooling, their scientific or technical knowledge, but without losing any of their social class biases, may attain the highest positions in the liberation movement,"* he warns.

Cabral concludes “...the liberation struggle is, above all, a struggle both for the preservation and survival of the cultural values of the people and for the harmonization and development of these values within a national framework.”

In Portuguese: *A luta continua!*

Cabral’s “[The Weapon of Theory](#)” was used in the introductory part of this course.

The importance that this outstanding revolutionary Amílcar Cabral placed on cultural and intellectual output is plain to see. The Mozambican scholar **Aquino de Bragança**, colleague of another intellectual (and like Cabral, martyr) Ruth First, called intellectual work “an instrument of the revolution”. It is the ground upon which the revolution stands.

Aquino de Bragança was himself killed in the 19 October 1986 air crash in which President Samora Machel also died, thirteen years after the murder of Amílcar Cabral.

We are not yet safe enough to think that the killing of political intellectuals and political cadres is a thing of the past, or that attempts at “*organized repression of the cultural life of the people*” have ceased.

At least 13 of our revolutionary writers were violently killed. One of them was killed in the interval between the last time the course was given, and now.

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[Patrice Lumumba, 1925 - 1961](#)

## Patrice Lumumba

This third part of our African Revolutionary Writers' Series is dedicated to the "Uhuru Years" that followed the 1960 "Year of Africa", when sixteen countries took their independence. In this instalment we feature Patrice Lumumba's short, powerful, historic [Independence Day speech of 30 June 1960](#) (attached).

In the Western Imperialist literature the independence of all of these countries has been recorded as a "granting" (e.g. thus: "Congo was granted independence by Belgium"). This contradictory view of what happened during the greatest worldwide political change in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century - the National Democratic Revolutions in the former colonial countries - mirrors the theme of Frederick Douglass's most famous speech, ("[If there is no Struggle, there is no Progress](#)") where Douglass says that **"power concedes nothing without a demand"**.

Lumumba's speech is still famous for making the same point, and particularly because he made the speech in the presence of the monarch of the colonial power, King Baudouin of Belgium (grandson of the original colonist and butcher King Leopold) who had already spoken in a paternalistic and euphemistic manner at an earlier stage during the same event.

Lumumba at once spoke of struggle, and of victory, and he spoke frankly of the vicious colonialism which had been overcome by that struggle.

Congo at that time was on a par with South Africa as a wealthy, quickly-modernising African country. The subsequent history of the Congo has been a tragedy of neo-colonialism including the martyrdom of Patrice Lumumba in the following year, 1961, and the imposition of the stooge dictator Mobutu who ruled until the 1990s.

It is absurd to suggest, as some Imperialist writers continue to do, that the neo-colonial reaction was Lumumba's fault for being cheeky in front of the Belgian king. No-one must be allowed to forget that these words of Lumumba's expressed the historical truth, as well as the feelings of millions of Africans at

the time, and that these words needed to be said and had to be said, so that they can now be remembered and glorified again in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century while Africa gains its “second independence” born out of the struggle against neo-colonialism and Imperialism.

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Eduardo Mondlane, 1920-1969

## Eduardo Mondlane

The **attached** text, given for reading as the main document of this fourth part of the African Revolutionary Writers series, is Chapter 5 from Eduardo Mondlane's 1969 book, "The Struggle for Mozambique". The chapter is called "Resistance – the search for a national movement". It is the part of the book where Mondlane relates the foundation of the united liberation movement, FRELIMO.

The creation of FRELIMO – the movement that in 1975 achieved victory over the Portuguese colonialists in Mozambique – owed a lot to Mondlane's work. Yet a large proportion of this remarkable chapter is devoted, not to political manoeuvres and negotiations, but to the cultural and intellectual origins of Mozambican national consciousness, some of them quite small. It is evidence of the high degree of importance that this great revolutionary, Eduardo Mondlane, placed upon all kinds of intellectual artefacts, and not just literature.

The place of intellectual output in revolutionary processes is part of "the point" of this African Revolutionary Writers series. It is notable that in this part, which includes three great Lusophone revolutionaries, Mondlane, Cabral and Neto, and one, Ruth First, who devoted the last years of her life to Mozambique (where she was assassinated by a South African apartheid-regime letter-bomb) they all give us strong cause to think how "*to unite political militancy and intellectual work*" and make intellectual work "*an instrument of the revolution*". These quoted words are from a note by Aquino de Bragança, Director of the Centre of African Studies where Ruth First was working when she was killed by the South African bomb.

Mondlane, too was assassinated, as was Amílcar Cabral. Mondlane's successor Samora Machel was also killed, in the contrived downing of the aircraft he was in. Aquino de Bragança also died in that crash.

Mondlane relates that in Mueda, Mozambique, on 16 June 1960, over 500 people were shot down by the Portuguese. This was in the same year as the infamous Sharpeville massacre in neighbouring South

Africa. The Mueda massacre, he writes, propelled increased numbers of Mozambicans into the armed struggle. Yet this event is hardly spoken of or written about in the English language.

The rediscovery of the texts used in this series was difficult, and took many months. No suitable text has yet been found to represent the thinking of Samora Machel in this series. Such texts of Samora Machel do exist – the references in books such as Barry Munslow’s “Mozambique: the Revolution and its Origins” are good evidence of their existence – but they are in Portuguese.

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[Agostinho Neto, 1922-1979](#)

## Agostinho Neto

Agostinho Neto, the first President of MPLA and the first President of the independent republic of Angola, was a great writer - a poet - as well as a great revolutionary leader.

The **attached** document, also linked below, is as good an example as could be found of how, through radio, speech, and eventually through the translation and compilation of the same into a pamphlet by the solidarity movement, the kinds of words which held the liberation movement together, and also publicised it, were made and multiplied.

Now, in 2012, it may be thought that the propagation of such words was easy in those days, or automatic. Nothing could be further from the truth. The liberation movements were outsiders. Their supporters in other countries, whom Neto here mentions and acknowledges, were not in the mainstream. The countries which now parade as “the international community”, as “NATO”, the “ICC”, and in other guises - in other words the governments of the metropolitan Imperialist countries - in those days were solidly and quite openly supporting colonialism. Portugal, for example, was then (and has never since ceased to be) a leading member of NATO, which is actually the armed wing of imperialism.

In these particular writings Neto does not, as the linked writings of Mondlane and Cabral did, reflect explicitly on the place of intellectual work in the national democratic revolution.

Instead, this set of three items, presented together as a pamphlet, directly exemplifies such intellectual work in practice.

It is hard not to be moved by these words even after the passage of 40 years. They still have the immediacy and the urgency that they had when they were spoken by Agostinho Neto and when they were heard by the three different audiences to which they were addressed.

These words carry truths and lessons that still need to be learned and re-learned. And in a different mood, some of Agostinho Neto’s poems, translated into English, can be read if you [click here](#).



[Gamal Abdel Nasser, 1918-1970](#)

## Gamal Abdel Nasser

Gamal Abdel Nasser was the leader of the Free Officers' revolution in Egypt in 1952 which deposed the king and established a republic. He subsequently became President of that African country until his death in 1970. Nasser was a giant figure in the liberation movement, the anti-colonial and anti-Imperialist movement, and in the [Non-Aligned Movement](#).

Nasser was a famous orator in the golden age of the transistor radio, and could be heard by that means in streets as well as in homes throughout the Arabic-speaking world in those days, and all over Africa. Our main linked item below is a speech that Nasser made just over a month prior to the 1956 imperialist invasion of his country – an invasion which failed, and was repulsed.

Egypt under President Nasser had nationalised the Suez Canal. The Imperialist countries responded with threats – as the linked, downloadable speech relates.

France, Britain and Israel finally mounted a military attack on Egypt on 29 October 1956, in what is known in those countries as the "[Suez Crisis](#)". This confrontation ended in a reversal for the imperialists, consolidated the republic, and established Egypt's sovereignty over the canal on its territory, forever.

The operation resembled the 2011 aggression against Libya in many ways, but especially in the demonization of President Nasser that preceded it.

But now, as Wikipedia says: "*Nasser is seen as one of the most important political figures in both modern Arab history and politics in the 20th century. Under his leadership, Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal and came to play a central role in anti-imperialist efforts in the Arab World and Africa. The imposed ending to the Suez Crisis made him a hero throughout the Arab world.*"

This is how Nasser began this 1956 speech:

*“In these decisive days in the history of mankind, these days in which truth struggles to have itself recognized in international chaos where powers of evil domination and imperialism have prevailed, Egypt stands firmly to preserve her sovereignty. Your country stands solidly and staunchly to preserve her dignity against imperialistic schemes of a number of nations who have uncovered their desires for domination and supremacy.”*

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[Ruth First, 1925-1982](#)

## Ruth First

Ruth First was a revolutionary leader in her own right, of the Young Communist League of South Africa, of the Communist Party of South Africa before it was banned in 1950, of the Congress of Democrats, in all the campaigns of the 1950s, and in the clandestine South African Communist Party, before and after being forced into exile in the 1960s.

Ruth First was a lifelong militant of South Africa's liberation movement, and a martyr to its cause.

But also, Ruth First wrote seriously and profoundly about other countries than her own, and about the African countries in general from the point of view of a scholar, teacher and journalist.

Aquino de Bragança, the Director of the Centre of African Studies where Ruth First had been co-Director at the time she was slain by the South African bomb, wrote after her death of "her personal struggle to unite political militancy and intellectual work". It is clear that she excelled in both ways.

Revolutionary leaders need to be readers, and also to be writers. Ruth First's work shows why.

Of the two linked items, the chapter from Ruth First's book "Black Gold" called "Workers or Peasants?" is the one that relates to Mozambique. Ruth First's work in other countries was not unrelated to the South African struggle. This particular summary reveals in a way that becomes shocking, the awful effect of South Africa's predatory relationship with Mozambique on that country as a whole, and on the migrant labourers and their families in particular.

Ruth First draws some conclusions, which might at this stage be challenged, concerning the co-operatisation of rural Mozambique as a component of socialism, or more broadly, of "development".

It might be that a better course would have been to simply guarantee a market to the peasants, and then to let them organise themselves within that secure market environment, whether through co-

operatives or in diverse other ways. In other words, there may have been more than the two ways to go that Ruth First describes in her concluding paragraphs. Read the piece to see what is meant here.

In the chapter, "The Limits of Nationalism", from Ruth First's book on Libya, what is described most clearly is the class dynamic of a state that rests upon the support of the petty bourgeoisie (or "petite bourgeoisie" as First tends to call it). This is a class that typically expanded very quickly after the independence of African countries, First says. It is a class that wants to do everything according to its spontaneous, common-sense bourgeois lights. First describes how in Libya, previously existing organisations were disbanded, to be replaced by new ones created from the top down.

There are aspects of this very fine piece of writing that may apply to South Africa today, and which also to some extent explain both the strength and the weakness of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya of the late Muammar Gaddafi, still in evidence today after the intervention and bombing of Libya by NATO, the sword of the "international community" (Imperialism).

Other books by Ruth First include **"South West Africa"**, 1963; **"117 Days"**, 1965; **"The Barrel of a Gun: political power in Africa and the coup d'état"**, 1970; **"Portugal's Wars in Africa"**, 1971; **"The South African Connection"**, 1972 (with Jonathan Steele and Christabel Gurney); and **"Olive Schreiner"**, 1980 (with Ann Scott). Earlier, Ruth First had worked for the Guardian/New Age, under the editorship of Brian Bunting.

Ruth First's own archive of her work is available for viewing on microfilm at the Historical Papers Archive, located in the William Cullen Library at Wits University, Johannesburg. The web site of this public institution is at <http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/>.

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### African Revolutionary Writers, Part 3a



[Frantz Fanon, 1925 - 1961](#)

## Frantz Fanon



The extraordinary co-incidence of dates of both birth and death as between **Frantz Fanon** and **Patrice Lumumba**, both born in 1925 and both deceased in 1961, highlights the precociousness of Fanon's critique of the post-colonial regimes which had so recently, from his standpoint, come into existence. Please read the essay "Pitfalls of National Consciousness", attached.

This essay was published in the book "The Wretched of the Earth" in French in 1961 and in English translation in 1963. The title of the book is a direct quotation from the song, the "[Internationale](#)", written by Eugene Pottier during the Paris Commune of 1871, the lyrics of which in the original French begin: "Debout, Les Damnés de la Terre!" Les Damnés de la Terre became the title of Fanon's book and was well translated into English as "The Wretched of the Earth" – a phrase since then embraced by generations of militants.

Fanon is so intelligent and so witty that it is easy to be charmed by him to such an extent that critical faculties are put aside. So much of what he wrote nearly fifty years ago has come to pass, not once, but repeatedly, and not in one, but in many countries, that one has to be astonished.

No other writer on this topic has come close to the range and the brilliance that Fanon exhibits with such apparent ease in this essay. To find literary comparisons one has to go far back, to the likes of [Voltaire](#) and [Jonathan Swift](#).

Fanon is particularly emphatic here in his denunciation of the national bourgeoisie in the circumstances of the newly independent country. Among other things he says:

*"In its beginnings, the national bourgeoisie of the colonial countries identifies itself with the decadence of the bourgeoisie of the West. We need not think that it is jumping ahead; it is in fact beginning at the end. It is already senile before it has come to know the petulance, the fearlessness or the will to succeed of youth."*

Is Fanon right? In South Africa, we certainly have problems of "tenderpreneurs", "narrow BEE", corruption and many other manifestations of the premature degeneration of the bourgeoisie, similar to Fanon's descriptions.

But we also have a theory and practice of National Democratic Revolution involving Unity-in-Action between classes, particularly between the working class and the national bourgeoisie. We have found this class alliance to be indispensable. Fanon did not have this theory.

This document is a great classic and is typical of the best of African Revolutionary Writing.

But it is not a Bible.

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